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Moscow Answers Our Balloon

During the past few days the Johnson administration has been sending up a trial balloon, via the American press, suggesting that we would shift from our present defensive tactics in South Viet Nam and carry the war to North Viet Nam—the source of the men and material for the Communist guerrilla operations in the south. The intelligence instrument shot into the air was intended to draw a response not from Peking, whose reflexes are predictable, but from Moscow. The attitude of the Kremlin became uncertain as a result of the deepening split between Moscow and Peking. The assumption that Moscow would remain neutral in the event we carried the war to North Viet Nam has encouraged those who would like to see President Johnson adopt a more vigorous policy and has weakened those, such as Roger Hilsman, who sought a more conciliatory approach to Peking. These shifting currents may have had some bearing on the precipitate announcement of Mr. Hilsman's resignation as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.

Had Moscow's reply to the balloon been one of silence, it would have strengthened the presumption of Soviet neutrality. The response just

supplied by Tass was clearly intended to discourage this theory. It was, in effect, an announcement that more active intervention by the United States on behalf of South Viet Nam would be matched by Soviet intervention on behalf of North Viet Nam.

This is the formal Soviet position—not necessarily the real one—and its exact meaning has yet to be determined by more balloons in the air and trial thrusts on the ground in the North Vietnamese border area. The Russians may fear that extension of the war to North Viet Nam would bring more active Chinese intervention and destroy what little Soviet influence remains in Southeast Asia.

At any rate, the Soviet reply cannot be taken too literally. If the Russians are worried that we might send American troops into North Viet Nam, bringing a move by Chinese troops into South Viet Nam, it is safe to say that is not at present Washington's intention. It is rather to give the South Vietnamese the same right and opportunity to fight the war in North Viet Nam that the North Vietnamese are exercising in South Viet Nam. The Russians cannot or should not object to a fair fight with one set of rules for both belligerents.